

MUHAMMAD AND OTHER RELIGIONS

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The Qur'an asserts that every community is sent its prophets, and that all of these prophets share the same essential message. Some are mentioned by name in the Qur'an, many of whom are figures found in the Hebrew Scriptures, including Adam, Job, David, Elijah, Jonah, Jacob, Joseph, Lot and Moses, among others. The New Testament figures including Jesus, Mary, John the Baptist, and John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, are often mentioned too. One of the Qur'an's chapters is titled Mary. Finally, certain pre-Islamic Arabian prophets appear too. Thus, although there are many shared themes and stories, there are many other aspects that are unique to the Qur'an.

Muhammad viewed his mission as a continuation of the religious careers of these earlier people. From the beginning, he closely identified his message with the Jewish and Christian traditions. In difficult times, he often drew strength from their example. During the period of fierce persecution against the Muslims, for example, he would remind his beleaguered followers of the patience and forbearance shown by Moses and the Jews when they were persecuted in Egypt. And, according to Muslim tradition, it was the Qur'anic references to Mary and the birth of Jesus that convinced the Christian king of nearby Axum (present day Ethiopia) to grant asylum to Muslim refugees fleeing Meccan persecution.

Muslim sources cite other individual Christians and Jews who played important roles in Muhammad's life, including his wife's cousin, Waraqa, a Christian ascetic who first observed that Muhammad's experiences of revelation resembled Moses' encounters with the Divine. This parallel reassured Muhammad at a time when he feared he might be possessed.

The Qur'an refers to Christians and Jews as "People of the Book" and calls on Muslims to respect them. In more than one Qur'anic passage, Christian and Jewish believers are specifically mentioned as having God's favor:

Be they Muslims, Jews, Christians, or Sabaeans,

Those who believe in God and the Last Day

And who do well

Have their reward with their Lord.

They have nothing to fear,

And they will not sorrow. (Qur'an: 2:62 and 5:69)

The reference to the mysterious community of the Sabians has been a topic of some debate in Islamic history. No one has definitively concluded who they were. Some scholars maintain that they are a small, forgotten community. Others assert that that they are Zoroastrians. Still others offer a much broader interpretation, saying that the Sabians are the believers of any divinely revealed faith besides the Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

Muhammad's relationship with Christians and Jews, was not, however, always warm. Nor is every Qur'anic reference to them positive. Political and tribal issues put Muhammad and some Jewish tribes in conflict, and this led to bloodshed more than once.

On occasion, the Qur'an also criticizes Christians and Jews, mainly with regard to their views concerning prophets. Christians are criticized for calling Jesus divine. In the Muslim view, though born of the Virgin Mary and revered as a major prophet, Jesus was a man of flesh and blood. The Jews, on the other hand, are criticized for rejecting certain prophets, as well as others whose warnings the Children of Israel ignored. They are also taken to task for their rejection of Jesus and, of course, Muhammad. Muhammad's own comments follow the Qur'an in making clear that Islam was not to be considered a new religion, but rather as a continuation of the original religion of Abraham. As expressed in the Qur'an:

They say (to the Muslims): "Become Jews or become Christians and find the right way."
Answer them: "No. We follow the way of Abraham the upright, who was not an idolater."
Say: "We believe in God and what has been sent down to us, and what was given to
Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and Jacob's sons, and that which was given to
Moses and Christ, and to (all) the (other) prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction
among them, and we submit to God." (2:135-136)

Despite theological disagreements and political disputes, Muhammad remained respectful of both faiths. A few years before he died, when his leadership of the Arabs was generally accepted, a delegation of sixty Christians with scholars and judges among them arrived in Medina from the southern capitol of Najran. In a kind of interfaith council rare in those days, Muslims and Christians, joined by Medina's Jewish rabbis, sat together discussing and arguing the meaning of their beliefs. This occurred at a time when, not far to the north, Christians and Persians had been engaged for decades in massively destructive religious wars. According to Muslim chroniclers, when the council in Medina ended, the Najran Christians mounted their camels and rode peacefully back home.

Muhammad once came upon a group of Muslims arguing about which religion had primacy over all others. This was the occasion for one of the Qur'an's most often quoted revelations: "If God had so willed, He would have made all of you one community, but he has not done so, in order that he may test you according to what he has given you; so compete in goodness. To God shall you all return, and He will tell you the truth about what you have been disputing."

(Qur'an: 5:48.)